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Agricultural

Social Service Series

College
Bulletin Number 19

The Improvement of the Rural School

By

Harlan Updegraff

Boston

American Unitarian Association

25 Beacon Street

SOCIAL SERVICE BULLETIN

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AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
25 Beacon Street, Boston.

Department of Social and Public Service

Social Service Series

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The Improvement of the Rural
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The Improvement of the Rural School *

The improvement of the rural school is, at the present time, one of our most important educational problems. Although it does not present the same aspects in every state, no section is freed from the responsibility of endeavoring to find its solution. It is not a new problem. Ever since the time of James G. Carter, and of Horace Mann, educators have called attention to the deficiencies of the country school. The counts in the indictment which have been brought against it through all these years differ but little,—unattractive sites, miserable buildings, insufficient equipment, poorly prepared and poorly paid teachers, inadequate and incompetent supervision, unevenly distributed enrollment, irregular attendance, meager curriculum, and a poorly conducted school. Although it is true that much progress has been made in these particulars during the past three-quarters of a century, and although in certain localities conditions are considered fairly satisfactory, the need for reform is more strongly and more generally expressed to-day

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than at any previous period in the country's history. It is the purpose of this paper to analyze the present situation, and to suggest certain advantages connected with one general method of attacking the problem of its improvement.

Less than a century ago we were a homogeneous people, with agriculture as the basis of our economic life; city and country were practically on an equality politically, economically, and socially. To-day the cities, with their vast industrial and commercial undertakings are dominant. City and country, instead of being in close sympathy as formerly, antagonize each other; and the city, because of its superior strength, is making still greater gains. Our educational history possesses similar characteristics. The country school has shared the fate of its environment. Once the equal of the city school, it has been left far behind. It is not difficult to discover the reason for this situation — it lies to a considerable degree in the character and in the environment of the country people. As a class, conservative and thrifty, and without a proper appreciation of the dignity and worth of their own vocation, of country life, and of the value of education for the promotion of their well-being, they have refused to grant the necessary support and other benefits for the betterment of their schools.

Such, briefly, is the present situation from the

standpoint of the past. We must now analyze those tendencies which seem to be shaping the future, with a view to determining what ends shall be striven for, what obstacles will probably be met, and what new development may assist as the campaign for the improvement of the rural school progresses; for it seems quite certain that we are reaching a turning-point in our conception of the school, and that new forces will rise in rural life.

Until within the past fifteen years education was generally considered as a process of developing the individual; the function of the school under that régime was, largely, to give the pupil certain definite knowledge which led chiefly to scholarly or professional pursuits, and to coöperate with the other institutions in society in developing sound moral principles. In the past few years the social elements in education have been gaining recognition. The individual is coming to be regarded as a social being; every child is to be prepared in the fullest manner for life and for service. Education is becoming democratic in fact as well as in name. As this tendency persists, the school will become more closely identified with the community life. Putting this another way, it may be said, the traditional school is becoming socialized. This socialized school will deal with the life of each child in that manner which will best promote his own present and future good, as well as the present and future

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good of other persons in his own and other communities, whether that good be industrial or æsthetic, physical or moral, intellectual or political. The curriculum will be made up of elements in the social life with which the child comes in daily contact; and the aim in the conduct of the school will be to bring about natural reactions between the two factors in the educational process, the child and his environment, thereby promoting in each child the highest intelligence and efficiency, and the greatest capacity for service.

The same movement in human thought which gave birth among educators to the socialized school has, within the past few years, led students of social and economic questions to the discovery that there are sociological problems in rural life which will probably prove as difficult of solution as the sociological problems of cities. The old and well-established belief, held throughout the North, that the abnormalities and excesses in the political and social life of the cities would be more than offset by the sanity and steadiness of the land-owning farmers, and that the country was therefore safe, has been severely shaken, if not entirely shattered. A recent article by Mr. Joseph B. Ross, in the *North American Review*, shows that the land-owning population in the wealthy agricultural districts of Indiana is leaving the country, and that entire families (not a child or two of each family,

as formerly) are going to the metropolis to enjoy its social and other advantages. Their farms are leased to tenants for cash rent at rates which are fixed so high by competition that the tenants do not conserve the fertility of the soil nor become attached to the farms, for they expect to move on within a year or two to farms where better terms of rent can be secured. Under such conditions neither the land-owners, who pay the taxes, nor the tenants, who do not become a part of the community life, are interested particularly in the promotion of the common welfare. In the religious and church life, instead of establishing independent churches and abolishing circuits, the movement during the last ten years has been retracing itself — churches are abandoned or put on circuits, and ministers are taking up other vocations to earn a livelihood. Schools have lessened enrollment, or are consolidated with other schools. It is even more difficult to secure the voting of increased taxes for their benefit than when the landowners lived on their farms, for, although the tenants would like to have better facilities for the education of their children, the threats of the landlords, who live in the towns, that certain privileges will be withdrawn, or that the rates of rent will be raised, often prove sufficient to cause the tenants to refrain from voting in accordance with their desires.

Agriculture has become commercialized and a

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system of landlordism has been evolved in many of the most prosperous townships east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio; and the indications are that the movement will spread, unless checked, throughout all the North-Central States. Rural community life has broken, or is breaking, down in the very regions in which conditions for its perpetuity and highest development seemed most propitious, and this has occurred at just the time when the isolation, which is the greatest drawback to country life, was being overcome to a remarkable degree by the construction of better highways, by free rural mail delivery, by telephones and electric railways, by travel to distant parts during the winters, and by the reading of the daily newspapers and monthly magazines. This result is fraught with tremendous consequences to the political, economic and social life of the nation. Realizing these dangers, the best thought of some of our statesmen and citizens has been awakened. It is now clearly seen that forces must be developed, if possible, which will permanently secure a land-owning population upon the farms. Rural life must be enriched to the point where it is just as attractive to those whose natural inclination is for the open country, as is the city life to those who best enjoy stress and strain. Both country life and city life are necessary to the prosperity of the nation, and the former should be considered at least

equal to the latter in dignity, in worth, and in true happiness.

We may reasonably expect the work of organizations formed for the purpose of promoting better conditions among the farmers to be prominent factors in rural life during the next few years. It seems reasonable, also, to conclude that, because of practical identity in aims, the socialized school will receive strong support from these new forces.

Let us now direct our attention to the question, what part may the socialized school be expected to take in the promotion of better conditions in rural life, both for the purpose of indicating the definite ways in which the rural school should be improved, and also with the end in view of seeing whether by its consideration any light may be thrown upon the problem set forth at the beginning of this paper, what is the best general method of improving the rural school.

In the first place, it is to be said that the socialized rural school should be only one of several institutions which are to participate in the promotion of rural life. Organizations among the farmers themselves for economic, political, physical, intellectual, and social purposes, and among the farmers' wives for social, domestic, sanitary, and literary ends, and the country church with its subsidiary organizations, are agencies of as great importance. The school must coöperate with these agencies, all

must work together for the common end, as it has been stated by ex-President Roosevelt, "Better farming, better business, better living."

In the second place, the primary function of the school should be, as in the past, the education of the children. This education should prepare them for the living of an intelligent, appreciative, efficient, and happy life on the farm. The curriculum should eventually be made over and adapted to each local environment; some of the traditional ideas as to the conduct of schools must give way to plans which will break down the barrier between school and life.

Two points in this connection deserve special consideration because they deal with that work which, in the promotion of rural life, is the special province of the school. (a) The vacant mind of the country boy or girl must be transformed into the active mind, occupied with the myriad significant activities of nature in plant and animal growth. The habits of close observation, and of careful comparison and analysis, should be inculcated, and such an interest developed in the problems involved as will offset the superior attractions of the cities. Ways to satisfy the æsthetic instincts by discovering the countless ever-changing beauties of nature should also be found. In short, the socialized school should reveal to the child the country life in all its richness, and, in so doing, create a genuine love for the open country.

(b) Education in agriculture in the rural schools should not be limited to the economic end, but should also minister to the intellectual, æsthetic, and social life. In the popular mind, and possibly also in the cases of some agriculturists, agricultural education and development have been largely associated with economic ends. The commercialization of agriculture to the exclusion of other aspects must be checked, if possible, and the school, as one of the conservators of the nation, should be so conducted as to counteract this tendency rather than to promote it.

In the third place, the socialized school should promote such organizations among the pupils as will prepare them for coöperative action in adult life.

In the fourth place, the socialized school should be so conducted as to make it a means of bringing the parents into closer relations through their common interest in the children.

In the fifth place, the use of the schoolhouse as a meeting-place for organizations not connected with the school should be encouraged.

And finally, in the sixth place, the teacher of the socialized school should be a social worker. In a personal capacity he or she should participate in all those movements which make for social betterment; he should coöperate with the officers of the Farmers' Union, and of similar organizations, with committees of their coöperative business organiza-

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tions, and with women's clubs, as well as with his pupils' organizations. His coöperation should extend also to the ministers of the country churches, the physicians, the boards of health, and all other agencies in the community which are endeavoring to promote the common welfare.

Having analyzed the past and present conditions surrounding the rural school, and having indicated the functions which the new type of rural school should exercise, we are ready to undertake the practical problem of selecting a course of action for its improvement which, during the next ten or twenty years, will most probably produce the best results.

The deficiencies of the traditional rural school — unattractive sites, miserable buildings, poor equipment, and so on — can be removed, in the main, only through securing increased support. Increased support can be secured by educational campaigns in local districts under existing legislation and by the enactment of higher minimum standards of local taxation, by withholding a part or all of the state funds, as determined by inspection, by placing the control over local taxes in a local body representing a territory sufficiently large to overcome undue conservatism or parsimony, by including cities and country in the same local district, and by similar devices. Weak districts can be helped by the distribution of a portion of the state fund upon the teacher basis, or by special aid.

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Better conduct of schools would ensue in many sections if schools were consolidated and pupils transported at public expense.

To meet the requirements for the establishment and development of the socialized rural school, speaking generally, not increased local support is necessary, but increased teaching power. This can be secured, first, through addresses and discussions in educational meetings upon rural social problems and the functions of the school and of teachers in relation thereto; second, by articles of the same character in educational journals; third, by introducing the study of rural sociology in normal and summer schools, and teachers' institutes, giving it a position of equality with psychology, and possibly for a few years a higher rank, omitting, if necessary, methods in academic subjects; fourth, by requiring later the passing of an examination in rural sociology for a teacher's certificate; and fifth, by the gradual modification of the curriculum, the methods of instruction, and of the conduct of the school.

The correction of these deficiencies which now attach to the traditional rural school is dependent almost entirely upon the consent of the people, whereas, the attainment of increased teaching power is more largely under the control of the teaching profession than any other element in the public school system. A campaign for measures which will bring about new legislation and consent of

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voters, must in most cases be carried on against a determined opposition and prove arduous and prolonged. On the other hand, the attitude of teachers generally toward their work produces favorable conditions for the gradual evolution of a socialized school with comparatively infrequent necessity for appealing to the people.

Both of these methods of approach to the solution of the rural school problem are necessary, but, to my mind, the less of the former — through consent of voters — and the more of the latter — through professional action — the better, and for three reasons: (1) The socialized school will help the community, no matter whether the school receives any benefit in return: this in itself is sufficient reward: (2) the various social and economic organizations which, it seems, will soon be evolved among the farmers themselves, will welcome and appreciate a socialized school, and will often voluntarily grant it increased support and other benefits: (3) if a new rural life is evolved as a result of the efforts of the various agencies, and if the socialized school performs its part in that new rural life, a campaign for increased revenue and other benefits to carry on the work of the socialized school, when necessary, will present only a few difficulties as compared with the number that are now encountered because of the broadened visions and the deeper appreciations that will have come into the lives of

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those who live in the country through the work of the socialized school and other social agencies.

I well realize that a minimum of support must precede the advocacy of the extension and modification of the functions of the school, and that political action is frequently necessary thereto. Support, I know, is dependent upon the ability of the people to pay the taxes, but it nevertheless remains that the greater extent to which the school ministers to the social life of the people, the more liberally will it be supported, and the less probability will there be of the necessity of wringing money from a people who are able to pay, and who will not, or of asking favors from those who are not inclined to grant them.

Situated midway between the political and educational measures for the improvement of the rural school is a device, partaking of the nature of both, and constituting a powerful agency for the improvement of the rural school. A professional body of county, assistant county, and other rural superintendents, chosen by boards elected by the people, without reference to their residence, would increase many-fold the teaching-power of the teachers and greatly promote the advancement of all social organizations in the country. I know of no better agency in educational administration for the promotion of rural life.

The difficulty connected with securing this in-

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creased supervision is that the necessary modifications involved are, like the removal of the deficiencies, of the traditional school, dependent upon the voters. Because the office of rural superintendent contains so many, and, to some extent, superior, elements of the position of teacher, I would place the importance of securing its establishment above that of other political measures in those states in which conditions are at all favorable for securing it.

The rural school problem is a part of the rural life problem, the solution of which depends in the end upon the farmers. The school as one of the institutions of the state which tends to its conservation, should perform its part in the broader problem, but what it can do finally depends largely upon the ability of those who teach to so take hold of the situation as to influence rural life in the right direction and to obtain the approval of the farmers. Coöperative effort is the key to the situation, and educators must do their part by developing teaching and supervising power to the highest possible efficiency, by performing loyal social service whenever opportunity presents in their fields of duty, and by carrying on vigorous campaigns for political action in case the development of the socialized school is prevented or seriously hindered by political conditions.

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